# The Nature of Hill's Later Poetry [1]

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Geoffrey Hill has been dubbed 'the most glorious poet of the English countryside since the first romantic started gushing about flowers'; 'few readers', William Logan claims, 'would trade the drenched phrasings of Hill's backlit scenery for his brooding on obscure theologians. Hang the cost in moral uplift'.[2] These are curious observations; as Henry King has noted in response, topography and theology are not so glibly to be distinguished:

> Logan either misunderstands or does a deliberate injustice to Hill's poetry in thinking of these two aspects as discrete alternatives. For one whose theological broodings have been as thoroughgoing as Hill's, descriptions of nature (such an inadequate label!) are not divagations – the Professor of Divinity escaping to his watercolours class – but an intrinsic part of a complex whole.[3]

King's anxiety about the inadequacy of his own phrase 'descriptions of nature' is telling, not just for signalling a fear that the phrase risks devaluing the complexity of Hill's work (compare Logan's 'backlit scenery') but also for conveying an implicit sensitivity to wider concerns about the relative value of different kinds of poetic accomplishment. The issue at stake here is the one Geoffrey Grigson touches on when he refers, in the introduction to *The Faber Book of Poems and Places*, to 'lines which earn the sneer of being only

[1] This article draws on material held in the Geoffrey Hill Archive in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds. I wish to thank the staff of the Special Collections for their friendly, expert assistance and the British Academy for providing the Small Research Grant that enabled my archival studies.

[2] William Logan, 'Living with Ghosts', review of *A Treatise of Civil Power* (2007), *New York Times*, 20 January 2008, <www.nytimes.com/2008/01/20/books/review/Logan-t.html?pagewanted=all> [accessed April 2012].

[3] Henry King, 'Fraught Celebration', review of *Oraclau | Oracles* (2010), *PN Review* 199, 37 no. 5 (May-June 2011), 73-75 (p. 74).

"descriptive"", and that Robert Langbaum notes when, in his essay on 'The New Nature Poetry', he suggests that 'the term *nature poetry* has fallen into such disrepute that no one wants to apply it to poems he likes'.[4] It is worth dwelling on this point of anxiety, both as a means of considering how sustained responsiveness to the natural world defines Hill's achievement and for taking stock of what has now become a dominant tendency in the critical reception of the poet's work.

Logan's position, though sui generis in its formulation, is not entirely uncharacteristic of the responses of other reviewers of Hill's later volumes (from *The Triumph of Love* (1998) onwards), as a brief collocation of comments from journals indicates:

> Few poets can match Hill when he is writing out of […] a tradition focused and dependent upon a certain exactitude of natural description. […] Despite the *gravitas* of his poems of historical witness, I am not sure that it isn't as a poet of landscape – in the rich Wordsworthian or Coleridgean sense of its being mysteriously cognate with the mind's own processes of self-realization – that Hill chiefly excels.[5]

> The most accessible and perhaps the finest poems in *Without Title* [(2006)] are vehicles for Hill's profoundly lyrical responses to the natural and physical world. There are a generous number of these. Their luminous particularity of imagery serves as a counter to the book's sometimes unrelentingly cerebral tendencies.[6]

> Hill […] can dash off a soggy English landscape in the blink of an eye. […] Hill's landscapes always come as passages of much-needed respite amid the more

[4] Geoffrey Grigson, *The Faber Book of Poems and Places* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 32. Robert Langbaum, 'The New Nature Poetry', *The Modern Spirit: Essays on the Continuity of Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Literature* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970), p. 102.
[5] Stephen Romer, 'Writing for the Dead', review of *The Triumph of Love*, *Poetry Review* 89.2 (Summer 1999), 68-71 (p. 70).
[6] Douglas Houston, 'Passionate Profundities', review of *Without Title* (2006), *Poetry Review* 96.2 (Summer 2006), pp. 107-10 (p. 109).

> querulous, questioning, quarrelsome poems that otherwise set the tone of his collections.[7]
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> Always the most visual of poets, and with 50 years' practice behind him, he now writes about England and the English countryside with a poise and vigour that would be enough by itself to set him among the great poets of the modern age.[8]
>
> There are autobiographical glimpses of childhood in Worcestershire and old age in Suffolk, and these paeans to the English landscape which has nourished Hill's work from the start are of such intensity that they allow no rival attraction. All the talk of Hill as a forbidding poet is fatally deaf to the countless breath-catching instances of beauty threaded through his work. He is especially good – that Englishness again – at writing about the weather.[9]

Such observations are symptomatic of prevalent views that currently help to shape Hill's reputation. They present a series of broadly apt and understandable yet also question-begging, argument-silencing, and up to a point mutually complicating characterizations of the poet's work. Three salient quandaries arising from the collocation may be summarized as follows:

1. The insistence that Hill's pre-eminence is founded on, or most securely achieved by, his poetic landscapes presupposes that qualities and concerns which might risk defining another writer's work (even if accomplished) as 'minor' are, curiously, in Hill's case central to the plea for 'major' status. (In this respect, it is tempting to speculate how Hill's reputation would currently stand if the work of his last two decades

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[7] Alan Marshall, 'An Uncompromising Genius at his Peak', review of *Without Title*, *Telegraph*, 12 February 2006, <www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3650084/An-uncompromising-genius-at-his-peak.html> [accessed April 2012].
[8] Tim Martin, 'O Hendrix, Player of Neumes', review of *Without Title*, *Independent*, 15 March 2006, <http://enjoyment.independent.co.uk/books/reviews/article343665.ece> [accessed April 2012].
[9] Tim Kendall, 'Hire Houses', review of *A Treatise of Civil Power*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 12 October 2007, 25.

had been bereft of, or less frequently characterized by, as Wordsworth has it, a 'sense / Of exquisite regard for common things' in the natural world.)[10]

2. The obvious rejoinder to point 1 is that, as Stephen Romer has put it, 'landscape […] provides more than stretches of freedom, of untrammelled vision', that 'Hill's huge ambition […] could never allow him to rest content with being a "mere" poet of landscape'.[11] Not only are Hill's depictions of nature also often modes of cultural, historical, theological or philosophical engagement; they also usually function as parts of larger poems or sequences (hence King seeing them as 'an intrinsic part of a complex whole'), and their significance needs to be read in relation to the wider preoccupations and rhetorical and formal qualities of these works. Nonetheless, the proposal that the 'particularity', 'exactitude' and appealing immediacy with which Hill records his responses to the natural world provides a welcome 'counter' to or 'respite' from the more recondite, densely referential and at times rebarbative stretches of the surrounding poetry conveys a sense (not lightly to be dismissed) that his richly realized nature studies serve as appealing interludes, to be relished as much for their own sake as for their articulations of the concerns of the volume in which they appear. Indeed, such is the disjunction that often occurs between Hill's field observations and the material immediately preceding and following them, and such, by contrast, are the continuities of concern and descriptive style, in Hill's later volumes, between the poet's various evocations of tree and flower, sky and weather, that it sometimes seems at least as

[10] William Wordsworth, *The Prelude, or Growth of a Poet's Mind* (1805) ed. Ernest de Selincourt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 235 (Book XIII, ll. 234-5).
[11] Romer, p. 70.

illuminating to take Hill's numerous notations from nature as each other's context (despite the insistent particularity and local attachments of each passage in turn) as it is to attempt to read them in relation to immediately adjacent lines.

3. As John Lyon has observed, the tendency of reviewers of Hill's later works to brandish 'a gobbet from the volume under consideration sacrificed in celebration of Hill as an English nature poet' reveals partial-sightedness, for the idea of Hill as a 'supposed laureate of English landscape' is significantly complicated by the international range of his imagined territories – including, notably, Wales and France.[12] Moreover, to conceive of Hill as a great English poet because of his concern with English locales is to imply a contentious (and potentially unexamined) conflation; to what extent does attentiveness to nature and the elements define Englishness? And is Hill any less accomplished (or English) when training his eye, as he often does, on other parts of the world?

The significance of all three of these quandaries persisted, and in certain respects intensified, in the final phase of work published before Hill's death. For all their formal, rhetorical and thematic complexities, the volumes of *The Daybooks* retain, as their collective title suggests, something of the quality of journal notations, with sketches from nature set down on the page alongside the poet's frequently oblique ruminations (as if in self-addressed short-hand) on various historical, political and religious concerns as well

[12] John Lyon, 'Self and Love', review of *Without Title*, *PN Review* 170, 32.6 (July-August 2006), 66. Lyon also challenges a simplistic notion of Hill as a 'nature poet' by observing that the poet's landscapes are often subject to 'the encroachment – would Hill's self-proclaimed admirers say "contamination"? – of artifice ("More than ever I see through painters' eyes"), of *human* nature and, pre-eminently, of the poet's idiosyncratic, provocative, unpredictable self' (66). The bracketed quotation is from 'In Ipsley Church Lane 1' (BH 486; WT 6).

as the works of numerous writers and artists.[13] Many of Hill's attempts to record environmental details in these diurnal notebooks achieve the crisp immediacy, keen sense of atmosphere and distinctive word-choice that his admirers have long prized, as in section 43 of *Oraclau | Oracles*:

> Among rough-spreeing gorse, now heather
> Gives new life to the colours of mourning;
>  Expansive its dense sojourning
>  Illuminates the drab weather
>  That sags in off the sea,
> Snags on the headland's thorny armoury.
> (BH 755; O 15)[14]

A few passages, though, are somewhat closer to the nature of a conventional 'saw this, did that' diary-entry, even when the language is – as above – held taut across lines of pre-determined metre and rhyme (or occasional slant-rhyme):

> A gale from out of Ireland ploughs up rough
> Cardigan Bay; a following splendid rain
>  Beats us indoors to self-sustain
>  With radio and *Telegraph* [.]
> (BH 788; O 38)

Hill's alertness to the elemental, to 'light's buffeting' (BH 756; O 16) over a stretch of land or water, to 'the conflagration of rain and wind' (BH 761; O 21), has found expression in vivid fragment-form across book-length poem-sequences since *The Triumph of Love*. His propensity

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[13] During a poetry reading for the '*Economist* Books of the Year Festival' at the South Bank Centre in London on 11 December 2011 (hereafter referenced as 'London Reading'), Hill revealed, 'I used to feel lucky if I wrote seven poems a year. Since June 2007 I've written eight books and feel that I'm flagging if I fail to write seven poems a week.' A podcast of the reading is available at <www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/12/economist-books-year-festival-geoffrey-hill> [accessed April 2012].

[14] Quotations from Hill's *The Daybooks* are as they appear in *Broken Hierarchies* (where the extent of line indentations sometimes differs from that presented in the original volumes).

to work such passages into his volumes has for some time now given the impression of a poet attempting to bring striking notebook observations, drawn from nature, into works often marked by seemingly disparate and discontinuous concerns. A sense of the provisionality and arbitrariness arising from numerous abrupt shifts of focus is reflected in several reviews of the first volume in the *Daybooks* series to be published; responses to *Oraclau | Oracles* perpetuated the reader's impulse to seek refuge from interpretative bewilderment (and in some cases from evaluative disappointment), and to gain reassurance regarding Hill's continued accomplishment, by turning in particular to his visions of nature.[15]

However, the concerns of the volume have made it impossible to retain the simplistic conflation of Hill's landscapes with a sense of Englishness – a conflation that, in any case, has seemed questionable since the publication in 1983 of *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*, in which the 'landscape and inner domain' (BH 147; TM 16) of Péguy's 'militant-pastoral' (BH 145; TM 13) vision of France is exquisitely rendered (if also tested against the battlefields of the Marne). As its bilingual title implies, *Oraclau | Oracles* is a sequence of poems imaginatively engaged with the country on the far side of Offa's Dyke from Hill's Mercian 'home' ground. The volume reflects the poet's self-professed 'historical, theological, sociological and economic interest in what has happened to Wales', an interest quickened by his discovery that his great-grandfather was one Pryce Jukes of Llanllwchaiarn: as Hill has

[15] The particular virtues of Hill's landscape visions are extolled by several reviewers of *Oraclau | Oracles*: see Jeremy Hooker, 'Other Land', *Notre Dame Review* 32 (Summer-Fall 2011), 248-52 <http://ndreview.nd.edu/assets/47784/hooker_review.pdf> [accessed April 2012]; King, 'Fraught Celebration'; William Logan, 'Blah Blah Blah', *New Criterion*, June 2011, <www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Blah-blah-blah-7068> [accessed April 2012]; George Potts, '*Oraclau | Oracles* by Geoffrey Hill', *Literateur* (March 20, 2011), <http://literateur.com/oraclauoracles-by-geoffrey-hill/> [accessed April 2012].

revealed in interview, Jukes (born 1826) 'uprooted and moved east into the Mercian Black Country, where he worked as a puddler in an iron foundry'.[16] Something of a kindred spirit to Hill's 'grandmother, whose / childhood and prime womanhood were spent in the / nailer's darg' (BH 107; MH XXV), Jukes – the dedicatee of *Oraclau | Oracles* – seems to emblematize for Hill the dignity, self-sacrifice and quiet suffering of the industrial worker. He also provides Hill with an ancestral point of access to an 'intimate Welsh landscape of disquiet' (BH 769; O 29). The 'disquiet' of the sequence arises at once from Hill's uneasy purchase on his subject, given his double sense of affiliation with and alienation from the homeland of a forebear ('This is a strange country, the words foreign' (BH 757; O 17), as he puts it in section 51), and from the physical, political and economic upheavals to which the Cambrian terrain has been subjected.[17] When he writes in section 108 of 'Novembering Wales, the flooded meadows / Pewter, lead-sheeting, briefly highlighted' (BH 776; O 36), Hill himself appears to be highlighting, in abbreviated form, the extensive metal-mining to which the ground below the meadows has been subjected. This connects to a more general awareness, running through the sequence, of the fact that the Welsh landscape has, along with many Welsh citizens, been well-worked, if not exploited; Hill writes in section 51 of the coal- and iron-masters' 'blood-intrigued Capital' (BH 757; O 17), and his work reads intermittently as a sad and angry lament

[16] Damian Walford Davies and Richard Marggraf Turley, 'Cambrian Readjustments: An Interview with Geoffrey Hill', *Poetry Wales* 46.1 (Summer 2010), 10-13 (pp. 12, 11). As Davies and Turley observe, 'puddling […] involves heating and stirring molten pig iron with oxide in a furnace' (12). Jukes is also a subject of contemplation in the poem 'Coda' in *A Treatise of Civil Power* (BH 599-600; TCP 49-50).

[17] King suggests that 'the disquiet is the quiet of a pastoral scene, broken by the intrusion of the same historically burdened language through which it is evoked' ('Fraught Celebration', p. 74).

for the 'misprised coalfields' (BH 744; O 4). At the same time, however, the sun's brief highlighting of 'flooded meadows', so that they take on the momentary appearance of 'pewter' or 'lead sheeting', is one of Hill's numerous epiphanies, a glint of brightened and transformative vision. It is clear, too, that Hill sees benign continuity, not merely conflict, in the relationship between the mineral world and man-made objects; in writing of a 'stone house' with a 'slate shimmer' (BH 776; O 36), of 'distant rain-draped slate flanks' that 'gleam like late snow', and of 'field walls that are quartz-spangled' (BH 745; O 5), Hill conveys a sense of mutual enrichment in the interplay of built and natural environments.

The illuminations of the world to which he responds are characteristically fleeting – as is evident from the very outset of the volume:

> The rain passes, briefly the flags are lit
> Blue-grey wimpling in the stolid puddles;
> And one's mind meddles and muddles
> Briefly also for joy of it.
> (BH 741; O 1)

Like the 'briefly highlighted' waterlogged grassland glimpsed in section 108, the wet flagstones here are kindled both by the quality of the light that colours them and by the quality of attention brought to bear upon them. Jeremy Hooker is alert to several implications in Hill's opening lines:

> The word 'wimpling' invokes Gerard Manley Hopkins, the other great English poet renewed by his experience of Wales and an exemplary figure for Hill. One may also suspect a pun on the great-grandfather's occupation in 'stolid puddles'. Certainly, what we have here is more than a neutral landscape. The puddles conjoined to the 'lit' flagstones 'wimpling' reveal at once brute existence and a fluid, visionary world. The mind meddling and muddling is part of the life it perceives.[18]

[18] Hooker, p. 249.

One aspect of the muddling implicit in Hill's lines derives from the momentary sense, before the first line-turn, of a reference to flag-burning ('briefly the flags are lit') – and this in a sequence that returns to issues of national identity via a contemplation of flags in section 92 (BH 771; O 31). This short-lived flicker of an interpretative possibility, along with the potential allusion to Hill's ancestral 'puddler', leaves it unclear whether the phrase 'for joy of it' reflects merely Hill's delighted response to the physical world in all its vivid particularity or, in addition to this, the pleasure his meddlesome, muddlesome mind takes in complicating visual perception with the cross-currents of cultural thinking that arise from the choice and placing of words.

Perhaps the most conspicuously deliberated word in the opening lines is 'wimpling', an adjective which, as Hooker notes, has evident Hopkinsian associations. To 'wimple' is, among other things, to ripple, an effect one can observe both when a breeze tugs the water of a puddle and when the wings of a 'Windhover' undulate on thermal currents.[19] Hill's acuity in perceiving how it is a shift in the quality of light, after the rain, that reveals the 'wimpling' in a puddle is reminiscent of descriptive capacities in Hopkins that Hill commends when he discusses the poet's work in 'A Postscript on Modernist Poetics' (2005). Reflecting on the poem 'That Nature is a Heraclitean Fire and of the comfort of the Resurrection', Hill makes the following observations:

[19] See Gerard Manley Hopkins, 'The Windhover' ('How he rung upon the rein of a wimpling wing / In his ecstasy'), in *Poems and Prose* ed. W. H. Gardner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), p. 30.

> The first fourteen lines delineate aspects of the Heraclitean world, of infinite change, its eternal round of creation and destruction, which is all intricately and beautifully detailed as Hopkins imitates its wondrous thisness:
>
> > Down roughcast, down dazzling whitewash, | wherever an elm arches,
> > Shivelights and shadowtackle ín long | lashes lace, lance, and pair.
>
> Roughcast and whitewash are indigenous ways of walling buildings, perhaps a memory of Wales where Hopkins would have seen the shadows and reflections cast by the sun and absorbed or cast back by the dazzling white of barn-sides or farmhouse walls. A 'shivelight' is a splinter of light; 'tackle' is a word for bits of ships' rigging, so 'shadowtackle' is the patterns of branch and twig-work from the nearby trees and bushes rigging the bright walls in the light of the sun. (CCW 570)

Hill's own evocations of Wales are attentive to Heraclitean flux. They apprehend the numinous in the natural with a verbal inventiveness that seems at once to strive for physical exactitude and to strain beyond verisimilitude towards the visionary. His sense that in 'natural Wales / Supernature's light steadily prevails' (section 23) is recurrently (and often riddlingly) expressed via a notion of alchemical transformation of the known world:

> Alchemic-carnal, such the earth remains
> In winter even while snow asperges
> From shaken branches, shows the ridges
> Fresh-configured, swept by shadow-vanes;
> And transience transpires
> Intensely focused crowing atop spires
> To what light is, a glaze between great flares;
> The sun arraying in the brittle llyn
> A limbeck of itself or of the moon.
> (BH 750; O 10)[20]

Just as 'shadowtackle' in the Hopkins poem describes 'the patterns of branch and twig-work from the nearby trees and bushes rigging the bright walls in the light of the sun', so perhaps Hill's 'shadow-vanes' are the patterns cast on the snow-whitened, sun-brightened ground by

[20] In the third line quoted, O 10 has 'shews'; BH 750 has 'shows'.

the shadows of 'shaken branches'; as 'vanes', the shadows illustrate the direction from which the wind is blowing. Signalling a debt to Hopkins, Hill captures their 'thisness' with phrasing that is, like the ridges of snow on the landscape, '[f]resh-configured'. Yet, for all Hill's attempts to hold fast in language, syntax and metre the intricacy and delicacy of what he observes, the figurative sense of a 'vane' as 'an unstable or constantly changing […] thing' (*OED*) is also pertinent, highlighting as it does the sense of the poetry's insecure purchase on the ever-shifting physical and elemental qualities it witnesses in this 'Heraclitean world, of infinite change'.

The insecurity is clearly the reader's also as there is much in Hill's description that challenges imaginative visualization and strains comprehension. The stanza reads in part as a philosophy of perception, rather than merely an exercise in it, but it is not a philosophy founded on rational premises. Here, as at other moments in his later work, Hill appears to be engaging with the spiritual side of alchemy and perhaps even to be reviving and extending the tradition of English alchemical verse in which he was clearly interested. A file in the archive of the poet's papers in the Brotherton Library at the University of Leeds contains an offprint of a 1953 article entitled 'Alchemy and English Literature' by Harold Fisch which considers 'how vitally important the insights of the alchemist were [f]or the metaphysical poets of the seventeenth century'.[21] Hill has put double vertical pencil marks in the margin next to Fisch's

[21] Geoffrey Hill Archive, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds, BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/223: Vaughan (1953-1994). See the offprint of Harold Fisch, 'Alchemy and English Literature', reprinted from *The Proceedings of the Leeds Philosophical Society (Literary and Historical Section)*, Vol. VII, Part II (Leeds: Chorley and Pickersgill Ltd, October 1953), 123-36 (p. 135); the missing 'f', a typo, is added in blue ink. Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library.

observation that, 'For the alchemists [...], Matter and Spirit were inextricably mixed. To them, [...] the external world was real and solid, [...] but it was also mysterious'.[22] Hill's attention was also detained by the following claim:

> It is arguable that all Nature-poetry, insofar as it ceases to be merely descriptive or rationalistic but involves a real *meeting* between the poet and the outer world of nature, implies some […] doctrine of Immanence; but certain it is that, in the seventeenth century at least, the notions of the Hermetical School passed into the imaginations of many different poets'.[23]

The notions seem also to have passed into Hill's imagination. In conceiving of the earth as 'alchemic-carnal', Hill appears to fuse, as Fisch puts it, the 'real and solid' and the 'mysterious'. As he does so, his phrasing itself partakes of the esoteric. The word 'carnal' in this context seems to extend beyond the 'corporeal' or 'sensual', but it is hard to tell whether Hill has in mind the *OED* definition 'not spiritual' or 'unsanctified', which is illustrated by an example of usage from the theologian J. B. Mozley's *Eight Lectures on Miracles* (1865): 'To a carnal imagination an invisible world is a contradiction in terms – another world besides the whole world'. To Hill's imagination, drawn to the possibility of Immanence, a clear distinction between the visible, material world and a sense of the spiritual is unavailable – hence, perhaps, the hyphen that fuses the 'carnal' to the transformative promise of the 'alchemic'. In any 'real *meeting* between the poet and the outer world of nature', the latter is susceptible to being transmuted into something beyond itself, into qualities that are invisible and immaterial. Like the metaphysical poets who were drawn to the Hermetic and Neoplatonic aspects of alchemical thought (notably John Donne and Henry Vaughan, to whom Hill intermittently

[22] Fisch, p. 124.
[23] Fisch, p. 127. Hill's double vertical pencil marks in the margin run from the words 'of nature' to the end of Fisch's sentence.

alludes in *Oraclau|Oracles*), Hill seems to invest in the idea that the natural world can reveal hidden truths and in doing so enable the process (or at least gesture towards the possibility) of spiritual regeneration – a kind of self-transmutation – for those responsive to what is being shown. The struggle towards enlightenment is aided if one perceives 'Supernature's light' illuminating the natural world. And such effects in turn prompt in Hill, as in his metaphysical exemplars, the processes of poetic alchemy, whereby new configurations of phrasing are a means of transforming one's perceptions.

Hill's attraction towards (or peculiar variation upon) a tradition of Hermetic thought is liable at once to incite and to confound the critic's hermeneutic impulse. In reading the 'alchemic-carnal' stanza, one may wish for the 'logic' of a paraphrase while also sensing the inappropriateness of this impulse. To attempt a single interpretation would be to work against the spirit of the writing, which inclines towards doubleness, if not multiplicity, of response, and which defies reductive rationality. The notion that 'the earth remains' 'alchemic-carnal' 'in winter', 'even while snow asperges / From shaken branches', is not easily glossed. There is the oddity of Hill gently twisting the verb 'to asperge' out of its standard transitive application so that it functions intransitively: asperging is sprinkling, and chiefly denotes a priest's blessing of a congregation with holy water; here, the snow does not asperge anything, but simply asperges. The implication of a sacramental glimmer in the winter scene is clear enough, but it is the grammatical twist which retains a sense of the unaccountable intrinsic to Hill's vision. It is also ambiguous whether, the earth, 'even while snow apserges', retains its intractable, unregenerate materiality or shows itself transformed. The dilemma is as irreducible as the compound adjective 'alchemic-carnal' is paradoxical, and it is akin to the contradiction of

ideas present in the image, or perhaps the anti-image, of 'intensely focused crowing atop spires', in which it is unclear if one is to visualize a crow perched on a spire or, since the bird is only evoked by an aural property, if the intense focus of this line is not visual but somehow trained beyond the discernible world. A sense of complexity prevails, too, in Hill's account of 'what light is'. In describing it as 'a glaze between great flares', he hovers between an empirical account of the phenomenon of electromagnetic radiation coming in light-waves from the sun and a metaphysical awareness that the light of existence is intrinsically fleeting and ineffable, a 'transience' that 'transpires' and soon expires, a glazed condition ('we see through a glass, darkly' (1 Corinthians 13:12)) lived out in a world whose own existence is framed by those two 'great flares': the radiance of Creation and the blaze of Judgment Day. Finally, there are the conundrums of perception at the stanza's end when Hill furthers his preoccupation with alchemy and writes of 'the sun arraying in the brittle llyn / A limbeck of itself or of the moon': here, the reflection of sunlight in the 'llyn' (the Welsh word for lake) seems to have been drawn into occult conjunction with the moon, as if the light has been distilled and transformed in a 'limbeck', or alembic – an alchemist's still. Given that the stanza form deployed throughout *Oraclau | Oracles* is derived from Donne's 'A Nocturnal Upon S. Lucy's Day, being the shortest day', one is tempted to seek a connection between Hill's vision of nature and Donne's talk of a 'new alchemy', of a mind transformed in 'love's limbeck'.[24] Yet

[24] John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* ed. A. J. Smith (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996), 72. It is possible that Hill's contemplation of the transmission of light is in some kind of negotiation with the cosmology of Donne's poem, in which 'the sun is spent, and now his flasks [the stars] / Send forth light squibs [weak flashes], no constant rays'. It is possible, too, that Hill's use of 'shews' and 'arraying' (O 10), which read as self-consciously contrived archaisms, imply a debt to the earlier poet: both 'shew' and 'array' are words in Donne's poetic lexicon.

Donne's is a poem of grief and regret, and its alchemical imagery distills a state of degradation, rather than regeneration. One cannot turn to 'A Nocturnal' to find the 'key' to Hill's engagement with, or literary exercise in, alchemy. The very idea of hunting for a philosopher's stone that will reveal the meaning of his stanza, or of his poetry more generally, is just one more version of the hunt for fool's gold.

Hill's 'alchemic-carnal' stanza is not atypical; an interest in esoteric thinking permeates *Oraclau | Oracles*. Five stanza-sections of the volume (sections 31-5; BH 751-2; O 11-12) are dedicated to the Welsh alchemist, mystic and natural philosopher Thomas Vaughan, from whose *Lumen de Lumine, or, a New Magicall Light* (1651) Hill cites in a note to 'A Pharisee to Pharisees', his essay on Thomas's brother Henry: 'When I seriously consider the system or fabric of this world I find it to be a certain series, a link or chain which is extended…from that which is beneath all apprehension to that which is above all apprehension' (CCW 687). Hill offers this quotation for comparison to Walter J. Ong's suggestion, in the essay 'Wit and Mystery' (1947), that 'theology and poetry […] both operate on the periphery of human intellection. A poem dips below the range of the human process of understanding-by-reason as the subject of theology sweeps above it' (CCW 327). With reference to Henry Vaughan's 'The Night', Hill concludes 'A Pharisee to Pharisees' by commending an ideal of poetry which captures 'an awareness of such extremes', whereby 'that which is above understanding-by-reason (theology) and that which dips below the process of understanding-by-reason (the contingent nature of sensory material) are briefly made to chime' (CCW 327). Although such observations do not resolve, or even reduce, any of the perplexities arising from Hill's own manner of responding to 'the system or fabric of this world', they do at least intimate a cast of

thought that might be felt to inform his poetic practice; especially telling is Hill's recourse to the adverb 'briefly', a word that is fundamental to his reflections on 'the contingent nature of sensory material' in *Oraclau | Oracles* ('briefly highlighted'; 'briefly the flags are lit'; 'briefly also for joy of it'). One of the most significant, but also most complicated, aspects of Hill's responsiveness to transient illuminations of perception is the sense that the 'thisness' of the world is simultaneously instinct with a sense of 'otherness'. In this connection, it might be helpful to consider some observations that Hill makes in the essay 'R. S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral'. In commending the Welsh poet for capturing 'the *haecceitas* of the Llŷn peninsula – "a branch of rock suspended between the sea and the heavens" (*Autobiographies*, 133)'[25] Hill implicitly aligns Thomas with Hopkins as a writer capable of imitating the 'wondrous thisness' of the 'Heraclitean world'. But exactitude of observation of the kind Hill considers Thomas to have achieved is not to be confused with an unambiguous or unalterable grasp on the empirical; as Hill immediately goes on to observe, 'if one is determined to invest one's art in elemental things, both language and contingency must be understood to be as elemental as one's favourite rock and unharmonious (unlike the Llŷn seasons), perpetually out of kilter with our potentialities and desires'.[26] For Hill, whose own art is frequently attuned to the elemental, the idea that language can secure one's hold on the contingent world with a quasi-lapidary solidity and sureness is in perpetual tension with his recognition that language is ever-shifting in its implications. The particularity that defines 'the contingent nature of sensory material', and that finds its correlative in Hill's attempts at exactitude of phrasing and cadence,

[25] Hill, 'R. S. Thomas's Welsh Pastoral', in *Echoes to the Amen: Essays after R .S. Thomas* ed. Damian Walford Davies (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2003), pp. 44-59 (pp. 52-3).
[26] Ibid., p. 53.

is also exposed to provisionality, to the 'eternal round of creation and destruction' to which Hopkins bears witness even while 'he achieves the "this" (the finished poem)' (CCW 391). Hence Hill's accordance with Ong's view: it is not that poetry passeth understanding; rather, it should ideally be responsive to, and humbled by, that which is beyond it.[27]

Another notable tension that Hill's work exhibits, and a challenge that it presents to its readers, arises from the sense that, on the one hand, 'intricately and beautifully detailed' observations (of the kind Hill celebrates in Hopkins) are 'briefly made to chime' in elegantly crafted phrases, held within carefully shaped forms, and, on the other, that the poetry of his later volumes is often self-consciously 'unharmonious', that lines and clauses are 'perpetually out of kilter' with each other, difficult to bring into interpretative alignment and sometimes difficult even to comprehend on the level of coherent syntax. Such considerations clearly have a bearing on the quotations considered thus far in this article; but they became even more pressing with the publication of *Clavics* in 2011. Here, Hill posits that 'the grace of music is its

[27] Hopkins is, for Hill, 'the supreme poet of "haecceitas"' (CCW 570). In the teaching notes related to Hopkins in the Hill Archive is a sheet of pasted entries from Hopkins's *Sermons*, including the observation 'Is not this pitch or whatever we call it then the same as Scotus's *ecceitas*?', along with the definition of 'haecceity' provided in the Glossary to John Duns Scotus, *God and Creatures: The Quodlibetal Questions*, tr. Felix Alluntis OFM and Allan B. Wolter OFM (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), pp. 493-540 (p. 511): '*haecceity* (*haecceitas*, from the Latin *haec*, this): The term means literally "thisness." It designates the unique formal principle of individuation that makes the nature, which all individuals of the same species have in common, to be just this or that individual and no other. Scotus regards it as a distinct positive formality over and above the common nature of the individual (*natura communis*). Petrinity, for instance, would represent the "haecceity" of Peter; Paulinity, that of Paul, and so on'. See the final page of 'AS KINGFISHERS CATCH FIRE: Notes for Class (22/10/86)', headed 'BUCKLE' in red ink in Hill's hand, in the Geoffrey Hill Archive, BC MS 20c Hill/5/1/106: Hopkins: Class Notes (1986). Reproduced with the permission of Special Collections, Leeds University Library.

dissonance / Unresolved beneath resolution / Of flow and stance' (BH 793; CL 14).[28] His words seem at once to refer to the subject of the volume, William Lawes, a musician in the court of Charles I, and to Hill's poetic method. There is a strong sense of 'resolution' in the predetermined forms of his stanzas; as he has stated, 'the poems in *Clavics* are ostentatiously, even aggressively, shaped, adopting patterns of rhyme and metre from Henry Vaughan's poem "The Morning-Watch" and George Herbert's shape-poem "Easter Wings"'.[29] But for all the deliberated shaping, and despite the promise of musical regularity within repeated forms, a sense of the dissonant and irresolute prevails. As several reviewers have noted, this sense is primarily generated by what Steven Matthews terms 'Hill's elaborate wringing of the language' so that it frequently functions as a curious 'variant of telegraphese'.[30] There has been some agreement that 'the syntax is, as is increasingly the case with Hill, very hard to follow', that it 'strains against meaning', that it 'does not so much unfold as infold' (another distinctly Hopkinsian turn).[31] In an attempt to account for this, one might consider the relationship

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[28] These lines are from section 3 of the sequence in *Broken Hierarchies* is section 4 in the original publication of *Clavics* (London: Enitharmon, 2011).

[29] Hill, London Reading. There is contrivance, too, in the fact that Hill designed thirty-two of these emblematic pattern poems for the original sequence; as one reviewer has noted, this is 'the number of paths of wisdom in the Cabbala' – the esoteric thought-system to which Hill makes reference in the first line of his numerologically 'keyed' volume. See Bill Coyle, 'A Difficult Poet', *Oxonian Review* 18.2, <www.oxonianreview.org/wp/a-difficult-poet/> [accessed April 2012].

[30] Steven Matthews, 'About Suffering They Were Never Wrong', review of *Clavics* and Derek Mahon, *New Collected Poems* (2011), *Poetry Review* 101.3 (Autumn 2011), <www.poetrysociety.org.uk/lib/tmp/cmsfiles/File/review/1013%20Matthews.pdf> [accessed April 2012].

[31] See, respectively, Lachlan Mackinnon, 'Discords and Distractions', *Independent* 3 June 2011, <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/clavics-by-geoffrey-hill-2292235.html> [accessed April 2012]; Benjamin Myers, '*Clavics* by Geoffrey Hill', *World Literature Today* 86.1 (January-February 2012), <www.ou.edu/wlt/01_2012/review-hill.html>

between syntactical confusion and regularized patterns of metre and rhyme, stanza length and line length, in the light of Hill's suggestion that the 'grace of music' arises from the impression of dissonant and irresolute effects held within a structure intimating a 'resolution / Of flow and stance'. Yet so persistent is the beguiling sense that successive clauses are entangled with preceding ones, and so startling and frequent are the shifts in tone, that the 'flow' and 'stance' of *Clavics* seem anything but resolved.

However, when it comes to Hill's visions of nature, the notion of 'grace' (as both blessing and graciousness) apparently remains available. Once more, reviewers have commended Hill's evocations of an environment as of a higher order of poetic achievement – an intriguing position, given that the syntactical indeterminacy and referential complexity that so alienate these same readers are often as conspicuous in the 'nature passages' as in any other part of the sequence:

> *Making of mere brightness the air to tremble*
> So the sun's aurora in deep winter
> Spiders' bramble
> Blazing white floss
> (BH 794; CL 15)[32]
>
> Hullo, thistle,
> Silver-silk head,
> Gashed green-blue woad,

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[accessed April 2012]; Jeffrey Hippolito, 'Give Me the Key', *Critical Flame* 15 (September 2011), <http://criticalflame.org/verse/0911_hippolito.htm> [accessed April 2012].

[32] Section 4 in the *Broken Hierarchies* version is section 5 in the original published version. Hill's italicized words may be a translation of line 2 (which has conflicting manuscript variants) of Guido Cavalcanti's sonnet 'Chi è questa che vien, ch'ogni uom la mira' ('Who is she coming, whom all gaze upon'); see David Anderson, ed., *Pound's Cavalcanti: An Edition of the Translations, Notes, and Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), pp. 42-3, 255-6. In his essay 'Envoi (1919)' Hill praises 'the sensuous intellect of Cavalcanti's "Donna mi prega"' (CCW 248).

Buoyant in old fallow,
  Watch by your dead.
    (BH 804; CL 25)[33]

  Chaste, all weathers.
  The journal ends
  Here in its fronds;
Oblivious the calm
  Jolt of a wave.[34]

The elliptical, clause-by-clause gathering of physical observations and thoughts (or perhaps physical observations *as* thoughts) is as hard to parse in these examples as it is in the 'alchemic-carnal' stanza and in numerous other notations from nature in Hill's later work. Yet if one looks beyond the local difficulties a more general understanding of the implications of the poet's technique could be developed by recourse to some of the guiding concerns of John Barrell's *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place* (1972). Writing of James Thomson's *The Seasons* (1726-30), Barrell contends that 'the crux of Thomson's method was […] the energy of his syntax, arising as it does from the sense he communicates to us, that the landscapes he is trying to organise can challenge and to some extent resist his desire to organise them'. 'Thomson', he argues, 'manages to incorporate the recalcitrant energy of nature into the structure he uses to subdue her'; in Thomson's poetic, 'the form of the syntax was the form of the place as he perceived it'.[35] Yet, with his impulse towards generalized description, and towards order and containment in his vision of the natural world, Thomson represents for

[33] Section 14 in the *Broken Hierarchies* version is section 15 in the original published version.
[34] Section 21 in the *Broken Hierarchies* version is section 19 in the original published version.
[35] John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840: An Approach to the Poetry of John Clare* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 36-7, 44, 159.

Barrell a limited model of the kind of poetic achievement under consideration. It is John Clare who provides a more thoroughgoing exemplar of expressive syntactic particularity; Clare's syntax, according to Barrell, records images 'as parts not so much of a continuum of successive impressions as of one complex manifold of simultaneous impressions'; the result is a poetic mode which conveys a felicitous 'aesthetic of disorder'.[36] The applicability of such ideas to the recalcitrant and energetic syntax with which Hill strives to express his response to the environment and the elements is broadly sustainable. His notion, too, that the achievement of musical grace is not incompatible with dissonance and irresolution might be said to reverberate within Barrell's understanding of Clare's aesthetic. Yet in pursuing such interpretative analogies, one would do well to remember that the peculiarities of Hill's syntax are not confined to his sense of place; since the same complications of clause-arrangement define the language of his later volumes more generally, it is important to recognize that the syntax and idiom of a landscape (or seascape or skyscape) as Hill renders it on the page has not necessarily or exclusively been generated out of the poet's responsiveness to the particular qualities of the locale. Nonetheless, to concede this would not be to deny that Hill's syntactical disorder may be especially well-suited to conveying 'the complex manifold of simultaneous impressions' derived from the natural world.

The hazed grammar of perception also seems appropriate to Hill's impression that the physical realm is instinct with the numinous. It is this animistic sense of nature that defines the most significant influence on Hill of Henry Vaughan, whose poem 'The Morning-Watch' provides one of the formal models for *Clavics*:

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[36] Ibid., pp. 157, 160.

[…] hark! In what rings,
And *hymning circulations* the quick world
Awakes, and sings;
The rising winds,
And falling springs,
Birds, beasts, all things
Adore him in their kinds.
Thus all is hurled
In sacred *hymns*, and *order*, the great *chime*
And *symphony* of nature.[37]

There may be a paradigm for Hill's poetic method in these lines: attentive to what Vaughan defines as 'the great *chime* / And *symphony* of nature', his poetry can be seen as a medium in which all that Hill perceives, though 'hurled' together, is nonetheless held in formal '*order*' in such a way as to express the sense that, as he says of Vaughan's 'The Night', spiritual apprehension and 'the contingent nature of sensory material' are 'briefly made to chime'. The notion that this is a compositional ideal towards which Hill's poetry aspires is supported by recurrent tendencies of thought in his critical prose. Hill's affinity with the seventeenth-century poet seems to derive from what Chris Fitter describes as Vaughan's 'Neoplatonic concern with a pervasive, invisible spirituality', a concern which results in 'a deeply unempiric landscaping, a transcendental imprecision', a 'blurring of fact into radiance'.[38] Hill's work, for all its sensuous particularity and its alertness to language itself as 'sensory material', is also drawn towards an 'unempiric', imprecise mode of expression as a means of conveying

[37] Henry Vaughan, 'The Morning-Watch', *The Complete Poems* ed. Alan Rudrum (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), p. 179.
[38] Chris Fitter, *Poetry, Space, Landscape: Toward a New Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 307-8.

perplexity when it attempts to register both the mystery of divine Immanence and the muddle of material existence: [39]

> The day cuts a chill swath,
> Dark hunkers down.
> I think we are past Epiphany now.
> Earth billows on, its everlasting
> Shadow in tow
> And we with it, fake shadows onward casting.
> (BH 794; CL 15)

While the syntax of this extract is not strikingly irregular, nonetheless the layout of the poem on the page, with its impression at once of nebulously floating skeins and of lines held taut in an inherited verse-structure, as in an ancient vessel ordained for the reception of transcendent intuitions, could be read as part of the grammar of the numinous. And the final line is dense with an indeterminacy that is at once semantic and Neoplatonic: in the post-Epiphanic state to which Hill refers, are we 'in tow' with the Earth itself or with 'its everlasting / Shadow', the night that underwrites each day? And do we make false forward projections ('onward casting'), as if in defiance of our mortality and the surrounding darkness, or are we ourselves 'fake shadows', as Plato's analogy of the cave suggests?[40]

It is hard to know how far to take an attempt to paraphrase, or to itemize interpretative possibilities, in response to a poetic method that seems intent on retaining a sense of the

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[39] See, for example, 'A Pharisee to Pharisees', in which Hill claims that 'language is a vital factor of experience, and, as "sensory material", may be religiously apprehended' (CCW 327) and argues for an 'understanding both of Vaughan's vision and his perplexities and of his way of "bringing into use, formally, or by authority" the envisioning of perplexity itself' (CCW 325). (The quoted words are from an *OED* definition of the verb 'to compose'.)

[40] See Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Desmond Lee, 2nd edn (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974), pp. 316-25.

ineffable. Hill's admission in 'A Pharisee to Pharisees' that he is 'far from convinced that the relationship between vision and language in poetry […] works according to theorems, particularly hermetic ones' (CCW 326), threatens to serve as an admonition against imposing too intellectualized or intricate a framework of reading upon lines that seem resistant to such an approach. Given that Hill himself writes of 'the swarm- / ing mass, the dense / Fluctuations of the materia / Out from which' he feels he 'shall be lucky to twitch/ Creative fire' (BH 791; CL 11), it would seem impertinent to assume an understanding of a poetic process that the author himself considers to be unaccountable and unstable. Professions of uncertainty in the face of his 'materia' – both the physical world he contemplates and the linguistic medium in which he works – are a conspicuous hallmark of *The Daybooks*, and are all the more pronounced in the third of them that Hill published as separate volumes. *Odi Barbare* (2012) is frequently self-reflexive regarding the fragility (and at times the seemingly unavoidable obliquity) of the poetry's own observations and operations. Hill refers to a method of writing that seems to yield only 'the merest memo' (BH 879; OB 53) or 'a token fragment' (BH 886; OB 60), and he reflects, with an attitude that seems to hover between self-criticism and self-justification, upon 'a process / Metric makes gnomic' (BH 854; OB 60) and upon 'proven things not salvageable like collage' (BH 886; OB 60).[41] The phrase 'into scrap language unpredicted landscape' (BH 869; OB 43), which arrives unexpectedly at one point in the sequence, might serve as an apt (and typically shard-like) motto for the ways in which the poetry of the volume records its perceptions of nature. Once more, Hill's visions

[41] For 'not' in BH, Hill has 'made' in OB.

combine a sense of the clarified and the ungraspable as they achieve (or perhaps receive) a 'glancing / Apotheosis':

> As of bare hedges as of fields awash, light
> Clouds I call grey-coppery early mornings
> Fused with sun-shot fog and the grassblades crispy
> Barely-heard tinsel.
> (BH 846; OB 20)

The self-conscious inclusion of the words 'I call' is characteristic of Hill's tendency in his later work to retain an impression of the notepad (or 'daybook') jotting in the finished – or perhaps the insistently unfinishable – poem. His reference elsewhere in the sequence to 'Goldengrove notebooks ripped for late bequeathing' (BH 874; OB 48) also captures the feeling that Hill either wishes to insist upon, or cannot but admit to, the sketchy and provisional nature of his descriptions. In its sensitivity to a posthumous state ('late bequeathing'), and in its nod to the Hopkinsian locus of grief (Goldengrove has compelled Hill's attention repeatedly from *The Orchards of Syon* (2002) onwards), Hill's wording is in touch, too, with the melancholy sense of evanescence that is another dominant element in his apprehensions of (and beyond) the natural world.[42]

The forty-fourth section of *Odi Barbare* pictures a winter scene with a combination of simple optical impressions and enigmatic interpretative implications that is indicative of the qualities of the volume more generally:

> Undisclosed clairvoyance of apperception
> All around: church towers and silos catching
> Shafts of the broad day;

[42] See Hopkins, 'Spring and Fall', *Poems and Prose*, p. 50.

Mistletoe's globules and conglomerations
Sealing boughs waxen with rich-cupped meniscus;
Gilding bare orchards by the moon's endowment
Even at sunrise.
(BH 878; OB 52)

The form of clear-sightedness that clairvoyance represents is one which accesses insights 'undisclosed' through mere observation – and yet the implication of the first stanza may be that it is only via the actual, phenomenal world that one may discern that which is beyond perception by the eye alone. To achieve this vision, Hill seems to suggest, one needs to enter an apperceptive state of mind. Perhaps the most richly suggestive definition of 'apperception' provided in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is the one derived from psychology: 'the action or fact of becoming conscious by subsequent reflection of a perception already experienced; any act or process by which the mind unites and assimilates a particular idea (esp. one newly presented) to a larger set or mass of ideas (already possessed), so as to comprehend it as part of the whole'. Apperception, as an extension of, or extrapolation from, perception, is a means of converting sense-impression into sense-making, and of discerning meaning in the combinations of what one observes. It sounds like a figure for poetry itself. In the context of these lines from *Odi Barbare*, the implication seems to be that the radiance of things beheld in the physical environment glimmers with the possibility of metaphysical meaning because of the uniting and assimilating impulses of the perceiving mind (and, by extension, of the mind that organizes them into poetic form) – although, once more, such is the semantic indeterminacy of the phrase 'Undisclosed clairvoyance of apperception / All around' that the possibility of full assimilation of what is being conveyed here eludes the reader. Hill's interest in the partly unaccountable processes of psychology shades once more into alchemical

notions in the following stanza, with the strange conjunction of sun and moon in the 'bare orchards' and the 'gilding' process through which light appears to effect a transmutation of trees. The mistletoe that hangs clustered in these trees is oddly figured too. Hill's choice of the term 'conglomerations' diverts (and perhaps seeks to redeem) it from its dominant contemporary use in business contexts. Here, Hill invites consideration of its original sense: 'to conglomerate' is, at its root, 'to roll or wind (thread) into a ball', and thus a conglomeration is 'a collection of things joined in a compact body; a cluster, coherent mass' (*OED*). In this sense, the process of apperception as the relating of an idea to 'a larger set or mass of ideas (already possessed), so as to comprehend it as part of the whole' finds analogies for itself in the clustering of the mistletoe balls in the trees, and in the clustering of Hill's phrases and their densely compacted implications. Whether coherence or tangle is the sum of perception here remains an open question – but if the reader feels compelled to pose it, a recognition that the poetry also asks it of itself seems fundamental to an understanding of Hill's methods and concerns.

'The poetry is always playing oblique games with me', Hill said in relation to the composition of *Odi Barbare*.[43] His claim complicates – though it by no means invalidates – the impression many have conveyed that his poems play oblique games with their readers. The very titles of the *Daybooks* carry the risk of enhancing such an impression; yet they also point towards dilemmas with which the poetry itself contends. *Oraclau | Oracles* offers a word that seems to promise enlightenment, but the bilingual presentation, along with the Hopkinsian upright slash that perhaps stands as a typographical signifier of the Anglo-Welsh border,

[43] Hill, London reading.

seems to insist upon barriers to comprehension.[44] Also, oracles are often 'obscure or ambiguous' messages, gesturing at truths not readily grasped (*OED*). Nor is it clear whether the poems of the volume are meant to be taken as oracular in themselves or as responses (and potentially baffled ones at that) to things which Hill considers to be oracular in the culture, literature and landscape of Wales to which he responds (an oracle can be a physical site, not merely a medium, of revelation). *Clavics*, too, is a riddling title. The nonce-word invites associations with clavichord music, but a red herring epigraph provides a fake definition: 'The science or alchemy of keys – *OED*, 2012' (CL 9) (and this in a publication of 2011).[45] With perverse ingenuity, and more than a hint of irony, Hill meddles with and muddles the implications of his title, forging vaguely key-shaped emblem poems tuned to the inherited music of Vaughan's and Herbert's poetic forms. The verse alchemy of Hill's sequence (a pseudo-'science', if ever there was one) purports to transmute musical and physical keys into each other. In the process, Hill appears to be searching for the interpretative keys to his intuitions and perceptions while simultaneously admitting to the risks of delusion and deception that are intrinsic to the alchemist's craft. *Odi Barbare* works by means of decoy also: '*I / Hate barbarians*' (BH 836; OB 10) is a phrase proffered in the second section of the sequence, as if in translation of the volume's title, but in fact Hill's work takes its name, and some of its guiding concerns, from the so-called *Barbarous Odes* (1877-89) of the Italian poet Giosuè Carducci. Carducci expressed his patriotic politics in part through a pastoral vision of

[44] Henry King associates the 'bar running through the collection's title' with 'the English/Welsh border' and suggests that it 'divides and yet conjoins, an emblem of the poems' language': King, 'Fraught Celebration', p. 74.
[45] In section 42 of *Oraclau | Oracles*, Hill writes of 'Clavics, the alchemy of keys' (BH 754; O 14).

ancient Italy and, as David H. Higgins has noted, saw his odes as representing 'an imperfect, "barbarous" adaptation of a Romance tongue to the prosodic features of classical Latin and its poetic forms'.[46] Hill's odes – which in turn constitute a self-consciously 'barbarous' adaptation of an adaptation – eschew nostalgia in their glimpses of the natural world, offering instead perceptions (and would-be apperceptions) that seem to articulate a desire for a clarity and unity of vision that they nonetheless recognize is, for the most part, beyond them.

As such, the poems of *Odi Barbare*, as of Hill's other *Daybooks*, are in accord with observations he made in an interview in 2011: to the proposal that his poetry is difficult because the reader 'cannot grasp a coherent point of view', Hill said that his reply would be 'well, neither can I' and that his poetry 'is partly a dramatization of that'. 'A lot of my poems', he then observed, 'are about failing to get something or failing to be able to clear one's meaning finally'; this, he claimed, is 'a perfectly legitimate area to write in, […] provided one is technically efficient and ends up with something beautiful. […] I think poems should be beautiful'.[47] In the reception of Hill's work, and in particular of the later volumes, a strong body of opinion has formed that the beauty of his work chiefly resides in his responses to nature. The impulse to make such a direct claim is understandable, but, when considered in the light of the poetry itself, its implications are far from simple. For, as Hill's work abundantly illustrates, visual beauty is indistinguishable not only from the beauty of the

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[46] Giosuè Carducci, *Selected Verse* ed. and trans. David H. Higgins (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1994), p. 10. The Sapphic form that Hill employs in the volume is similar to the version used by Carducci in his *Odi Barbare* and to that used by Philip Sidney in *The Arcadia*, from which one of the epigraphs to Hill's volume is derived.

[47] Hill, 'Poems Should be Beautiful', podcast of interview excerpts, *The Economist Online*, 2 December 2011, <www.economist.com/blogs/prospero/2011/12/economist-books-year-festival-geoffrey-hill> [accessed April 2012].

cadences through which a sense of the visual is conveyed but also from the intricacy, even the delicacy, of contemplation brought to bear upon one's surroundings. Coleridge's observations on this point might provide a useful, and suitably graceful, measure of Hill's achievement:

> [I]mages, however beautiful, though faithfully copied from nature, and as accurately represented in words, do not of themselves characterize the poet. They become proofs of original genius only as far as they are modified by a predominant passion; or by associated thoughts or images awakened by that passion; or when they have the effect of reducing multitude to unity, or succession to an instant; or lastly, when a human and intellectual life is transferred to them from the poet's own spirit,
>
> > Which shoots its being through earth, sea and air.[48]

[48] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria, or Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions* (1817) ed. George Watson (London: Dent, 1984), p. 177. (The line of poetry is from Coleridge's 'France, An Ode' (1798).)